



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 622

RIN 0648-BM12

Fisheries of the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, and South Atlantic; Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic; Amendment 52

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Announcement of availability of fishery management plan amendment; request for comments.

SUMMARY: The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) submitted Amendment 52 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic (FMP) for review, approval, and implementation by NMFS. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, Amendment 52 to the FMP would revise the acceptable biological catch (ABC), overfishing limit (OFL), annual catch limits (ACLs), annual optimum yield (OY), sector allocations, commercial longline component fishing season, and recreational accountability measures (AMs) for golden tilefish. For blueline tilefish, Amendment 52 would reduce the recreational bag limit, modify the possession limits, and revise the recreational AMs. The purpose of Amendment 52 is to respond to the most recent stock assessment for golden tilefish and to prevent

recreational landings from exceeding the recreational ACLs for golden tilefish and blueline tilefish.

DATES: Written comments must be received on or before [insert date 60 days after date of publication in the FEDERAL REGISTER].

ADDRESSES: You may submit comments on Amendment 52, identified by "NOAA-NMFS-2023-0082," by either of the following methods:

- *Electronic Submission:* Submit all electronic public comments via the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal. Go to <https://www.regulations.gov> and enter "NOAA-NMFS-2023-0082", in the Search box. Click the "Comment" icon, complete the required fields, and enter or attach your comments.

- *Mail:* Submit written comments to Karla Gore, Southeast Regional Office, NMFS, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701.

Instructions: Comments sent by any other method, to any other address or individual, or received after the end of the comment period, may not be considered by NMFS. All comments received are a part of the public record and will generally be posted for public viewing on www.regulations.gov without change. All personal identifying information (e.g., name, address), confidential business information, or otherwise sensitive information submitted voluntarily by the sender will be publicly

accessible. NMFS will accept anonymous comments (enter "N/A" in the required fields if you wish to remain anonymous).

Electronic copies of Amendment 52, which includes a fishery impact statement and a regulatory impact review, may be obtained from the Southeast Regional Office website at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/action/amendment-52-changes-catch-levels-allocations-accountability-measures-and-management>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Karla Gore, telephone: 727-824-5305, or email: karla.gore@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) requires each regional fishery management council to submit any fishery management plan or amendment to the Secretary of Commerce (the Secretary) for review and approval, partial approval, or disapproval. The Magnuson-Stevens Act also requires that NMFS, upon receiving a fishery management plan or amendment, publish an announcement in the **Federal Register** notifying the public that the fishery management plan or amendment is available for review and comment.

The Council developed the FMP that is being revised by Amendment 52. If approved, Amendment 52 would be implemented by NMFS through regulations at 50 CFR part 622 under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Background

The Council and NMFS manage the snapper-grouper fishery, including golden tilefish and blueline tilefish, in Federal waters from North Carolina south to the Florida Keys in the South Atlantic under the FMP. The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires NMFS and regional fishery management councils to prevent overfishing and achieve, on a continuing basis, the OY from federally managed fish stocks. These mandates are intended to ensure that fishery resources are managed for the greatest overall benefit to the Nation, particularly with respect to providing food production and recreational opportunities, and protecting marine ecosystems.

All weights described in this document are in gutted weight, unless otherwise specified.

The South Atlantic stock of golden tilefish was first assessed through the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) process in 2004 (SEDAR 4). In response to the assessment, the Council submitted management measures in Amendment 13C to the FMP. The final rule to implement Amendment 13C specified a commercial quota for golden tilefish of 295,000 lb (133,810 kg); a commercial trip limit for golden tilefish of 4,000 lb (1,814 kg), and if 75 percent of the quota is landed on or before September 1, then a reduction to 300 lb (136 kg); and a recreational bag limit of one golden tilefish per person per day

included within the five-grouper aggregate bag limit (71 FR 55096, September 21, 2006). The Council submitted sector allocations for golden tilefish in Amendment 17B to the FMP, allocating 97 percent of the ACL to the commercial sector and 3 percent of the ACL to the recreational sector. In addition, for golden tilefish, Amendment 17B contained management measures that established: a total ACL of 291,566 lb (132,252 kg), a commercial ACL of 282,819 lb (128,285 kg), and a recreational ACL of 1,578 fish; commercial and recreational AMs; and a longline endorsement for the commercial component of golden tilefish (75 FR 82280, December 30, 2010).

In 2011, a new stock assessment was completed for golden tilefish (SEDAR 25 2011) and the Council submitted Regulatory Amendment 12 to the FMP in response to the assessment. In Regulatory Amendment 12, the total ACL was set at 558,036 lb (253,121 kg), the existing allocations were applied to revise the sector ACLs to 541,295 lb (245,527 kg) for the commercial sector and 3,019 fish for the recreational sector, and the recreational annual catch target and sector AMs were revised (77 FR 61295, October 9, 2012). In Amendment 18B to the FMP, the golden tilefish commercial ACL was divided between two commercial fishing gear components, giving 75 percent of the ACL to the longline component with a 4,000 lb (1,814 kg) trip limit and 25 percent of the ACL to the hook-and-line component

with a 500 lb (227 kg) trip limit (78 FR 23858, April 23, 2013).

In 2016, an update to the SEDAR 25 stock assessment indicated that golden tilefish was undergoing overfishing (SEDAR 25 Update 2016). Following two interim rules that immediately reduced the overfishing (83 FR 65, January 2, 2018; 83 FR 28387, June 19, 2018), the Council submitted longer-term measures in Regulatory Amendment 28 to the FMP that reduced the golden tilefish ACLs. The existing allocations were applied to revise the sector ACLs to 331,740 lb (150,475 kg) for the commercial sector (further divided with 75 percent to the longline component and 25 percent to the hook-and-line component) and 2,316 fish for the recreational sector (83 FR 62508, December 4, 2018).

The Council submitted Amendment 52 to the FMP in response to a new stock assessment for golden tilefish. The new assessment, SEDAR 66, was completed in 2020 and it indicated that the stock was not undergoing overfishing and was not overfished. SEDAR 66 includes recreational landings estimates using the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES), as discussed below. The revised catch levels recommended by the Council in Amendment 52 are based on their Scientific and Statistical Committee's (SSC) recommended ABC and the results of SEDAR 66. The Council received the results of the assessment and the SSC's recommendations for the OFL and ABC at the June

2021 Council meeting.

In response to golden tilefish longline vessel fishermen's concerns about avoiding oversupplying the market in the first part of January and allowing commercial longline vessels to remain fishing for golden tilefish during the Lenten season when prices tend to be relatively high, Amendment 52 would change the starting date of the fishing season for the commercial longline component from January 1st to January 15th. In addition, the rule would revise the recreational AM to help keep the recreational sector within its ACL.

As for blue-line tilefish, revising some management measures would help keep the recreational sector within its ACL. The most recent stock assessments for blue-line tilefish were completed in 2017 and did not indicate that the stock was undergoing overfishing or overfished. However, because the recreational landings for blue-line tilefish managed under the FMP exceeded the recreational ACL every year from 2015-2020, the Council decided to revise certain recreational management measures to help keep the recreational sector within its ACL.

NMFS has preliminarily determined that the actions in Amendment 52 are based on the best scientific information available, and are intended to achieve OY while minimizing, to the extent practicable, adverse social and economic effects, pending further review following public comment.

Actions Contained in Amendment 52

Amendment 52 would modify management of South Atlantic golden tilefish and blueline tilefish. For golden tilefish, Amendment 52 would revise the ABC, OFL, ACLs, annual OY, sector allocations, the commercial longline component fishing season, and recreational AMs. For blueline tilefish, Amendment 52 would reduce the recreational bag limit, modify the possession limits, and revise the recreational AMs.

Golden Tilefish ABC and Annual OY

The current OFL and ABC are inclusive of MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) estimates of private recreational and charter landings. The Council's SSC reviewed the latest stock assessment (SEDAR 66) and recommended new OFL and ABC levels as determined by SEDAR 66. The assessment and associated SSC recommendations incorporated the revised estimates for recreational catch and effort from the MRIP Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) and the updated FES. MRIP began incorporating a new survey design for APAIS in 2013 and replaced the CHTS with FES in 2018. Prior to the implementation of MRIP in 2008, recreational landings estimates were generated using the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS). As explained in Amendment 52, total recreational fishing effort estimates generated from MRIP FES are generally higher than both the

MRFSS and MRIP CHTS estimates. This difference in estimates is because MRIP FES is designed to more accurately measure fishing activity, not because there was a sudden increase in fishing effort. The MRIP FES is considered a more reliable estimate of recreational effort by the Council's SSC, the Council, and NMFS, and more robust compared to the MRIP CHTS method. The new ABC and OFL recommendations within Amendment 52 also represent the best scientific information available as determined by the SSC.

The OY for golden tilefish would be specified on an annual basis and would be set equal to the ABC and total ACL, in accordance with the guidance provided in the Magnuson-Stevens Act National Standard 1 Guidelines at 50 CFR 600.310(f)(4)(iv).

Golden Tilefish Total ACL

As implemented through Regulatory Amendment 28 to the FMP, the current total ACL and annual OY for golden tilefish are equal to the current ABC of 342,000 lb (155,129 kg) (83 FR 62508, December 4, 2018). In Amendment 52, the ABC would be revised based on SEDAR 66 and the recommendation of the SSC, and set the ABC, ACL, and annual OY equal to each other.

Amendment 52 would revise the total ACL and annual OY equal to the recommended ABC of 435,000 lb (197,313 kg) for 2023; 448,000 lb (203,209 kg) for 2024; 458,000 lb (207,745 kg) for 2025; 466,000 lb (211,374 kg) for 2026 and

subsequent fishing years.

Golden Tilefish Sector Allocations and ACLs

Amendment 52 would revise the sector allocations and sector ACLs for golden tilefish. The current sector ACLs for golden tilefish are based on the commercial and recreational allocations of the total ACL at 97 percent and 3 percent, respectively. The current allocations are based on the allocation formula $(ACL = ((\text{mean landings } 2006\text{-}2008) * 0.5)) + ((\text{mean landings } 1986\text{-}2008) * 0.5))$ adopted by the Council in the Comprehensive ACL Amendment to the FMP, which considered past and present participation (77 FR 15915, March 16, 2012). Those allocations were established based on balancing long-term catch history with more recent catch history to achieve a fair and equitable method to allocate fishery resources.

The revised golden tilefish sector allocations in Amendment 52 would result in commercial and recreational allocations of 96.70 percent and 3.30 percent, respectively. The revised sector allocations were determined by applying the allocation formula (described above) to the recreational MRIP FES estimates used in SEDAR 66. Utilizing these revised recreational estimates would result in a slight shift of allocation to the recreational sector, with the percentages of annual catch increasing from the current 3 percent to the proposed 3.30 percent. In proposing this change, the Council considered the limited

recreational effort for, and harvest of, golden tilefish, and found that allocating 3.30 percent of the revised total ACL for golden tilefish to the recreational sector would be a fair and equitable allocation that is reasonably calculated to promote conservation, and that does not give any entity an excessive share of harvest privileges based on the historical and current harvest of golden tilefish. In addition, this allocation division encourages a rational and well-managed use of the golden tilefish resource that also optimizes the social and economic benefits.

The commercial ACLs (commercial sector hook-and-line and longline components combined) would be 420,645 lb (190,801 kg) for 2023; 433,216 lb (196,503 kg) for 2024; 442,886 lb (200,890 kg) for 2025; and 450,622 lb (204,399 kg) for the 2026 and subsequent fishing years.

The recreational ACLs (in numbers of fish) would be 2,559 for the 2023 fishing year; 2,635 for the 2024 fishing year; 2,694 for the 2025 fishing year; 2,741 for the 2026 and subsequent fishing years.

Golden Tilefish Commercial Component Allocations

As established in Amendment 18B to the FMP, the commercial ACL is allocated between two gear components: 25 percent is allocated to the hook-and-line component and 75 percent to the longline component (77 FR 23858, April 23, 2013). The allocation percentages between the hook-and-line and longline components were not modified in Amendment 52,

but the hook-and-line and longline component ACLs (quotas) would be revised based on the revised commercial ACL. The commercial hook-and-line ACL would be 105,161 lb (47,700 kg) for 2023; 108,304 lb (49,126 kg) for 2024; 110,722 lb (50,223 kg) for 2025; and 112,656 lb (51,100 kg) for 2026 and subsequent years.

The ACLs for the longline component would be 315,484 lb (143,101 kg) for 2023; 324,912 lb (147,378 kg) for 2024; 332,165 lb (150,668 kg) for 2025; and 337,967 lb (153,299 kg) for the 2026 and subsequent fishing years.

Golden Tilefish Commercial Longline Component Fishing Season

Amendment 52 would change the start date for the fishing season for the commercial longline component from January 1st to January 15th. A closed season would be established for the commercial longline component annually from January 1 through January 14. Starting the commercial season on January 15th for the longline component would help to avoid oversupplying the market in the first part of January and allow commercial longline vessels to remain fishing for golden tilefish during the Lenten season when prices tend to be relatively high.

Blueline Tilefish Recreational Bag and Possession Limits

In August 2016, Regulatory Amendment 25 to the FMP established the current recreational bag limit of three fish per person per day (81 FR 45245, July 13, 2016). As

discussed above, recreational landings for blueline tilefish have exceeded the recreational ACL every year from 2015-2020. Amendment 52 would reduce the recreational bag limit for blueline tilefish from three to two fish per person per day to help prevent recreational landings from exceeding the recreational ACL in future years.

Additionally, the captain and crew of a for-hire vessel with a valid Federal South Atlantic Charter/Headboat Snapper-Grouper Permit are currently allowed to retain bag limit quantities of all snapper-grouper species during the open recreational season. In addition to reducing the recreational bag and possession limits to two fish per person per day, Amendment 52 would prohibit the retention of blueline tilefish by the captain and crew. A bag limit of two blueline tilefish per person per day and prohibiting the retention of the bag limit by captain and crew would result in an overall 12.2 percent reduction in harvest for the recreational sector. Reducing the blueline tilefish bag limit from three to two fish per person per day and prohibiting retention of the bag limit by for-hire captain and crew would, in combination, be expected to help keep the recreational landings of blueline tilefish within the recreational ACL.

Golden Tilefish and Blueline Tilefish Recreational AMs

Amendment 52 would also revise the recreational AMs for golden tilefish and blueline tilefish. The current

recreational AMs for golden tilefish were established through the final rule for Amendment 34 to the FMP (81 FR 3731, January 22, 2016). The current recreational AMs for blueline tilefish were established through the final rule for Amendment 32 to the FMP (80 FR 16583, March 30, 2015). The current AMs for both species include an inseason closure for the remainder of the fishing year if recreational landings reach or are projected to reach their respective recreational ACL. The current post-season AMs state if the recreational ACL is exceeded, then during the following fishing year, recreational landings will be monitored for a persistence in increased landings and during that following fishing year, if the total ACL is exceeded and the species is overfished, the length of the recreational fishing season is reduced and the recreational ACL is reduced by the amount of the recreational ACL overage.

Amendment 52 would revise the recreational AMs for both golden tilefish and blueline tilefish to remove the current inseason closure if the recreational ACL is reached or projected to be reached and the post-season AM that is tied to the overfished status of the stock.

The revised recreational AM would have NMFS projecting the length of the recreational season based on catch rates from the previous fishing year to determine when the recreational ACL would be expected to be met. NMFS would

announce the length of the recreational season and its ending date annually in the **Federal Register**.

The current AMs would be revised because of the time delay of when recreational landings information becomes available to use for inseason AM actions for species with short fishing seasons or relatively small amounts of fish. For blueline tilefish, the current recreational fishing season is 4 months long, from May through August, and the recreational ACL for golden tilefish is 2,316 fish. In these circumstances, the current inseason AMs would not be effective in keeping landings from exceeding the recreational ACL. As previously discussed, the recreational landings for blueline tilefish exceeded the recreational ACL every year from 2015-2020. The golden tilefish recreational ACL has also frequently been exceeded, with the recreational sector exceeding its ACL every year since 2010, except in 2014 and 2017.

The current post-season recreational AMs that would apply corrective action for ACL overages were not being triggered because they were tied to a determination that the stock was considered to be overfished, and neither blueline nor golden tilefish is considered to be overfished. Consequently, any overages of the recreational ACL would be likely to continue to occur.

In addition, the Magnuson-Stevens Act Guidelines under National Standard 1 advise Councils to reevaluate the

system of ACLs and AMs when overages of a stock's ACL occur more than once in 4 consecutive years. The purpose of the revised AMs are to prevent recreational landings from exceeding the respective recreational ACLs for both golden tilefish and blueline tilefish. The revised recreational AMs would be more effective at restraining landings to the recreational ACL. In Amendment 52, for blueline tilefish, the Council considered it prudent to both modify the recreational AM and reduce the recreational retention limit to further ensure recreational landings would not exceed the ACL. Amendment 52 would not adjust commercial AMs for either species.

Proposed Rule for Amendment 52

A proposed rule to implement Amendment 52 has been drafted. In accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Act, NMFS is evaluating the proposed rule for Amendment 52 to determine whether it is consistent with the FMP, the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and other applicable law. If that determination is affirmative, NMFS will publish the proposed rule in the **Federal Register** for public review and comment.

Consideration of Public Comments

The Council has submitted Amendment 52 for Secretarial review, approval, and implementation. Comments on Amendment 53 must be received by [*insert date 60 days after date of publication in the FEDERAL REGISTER*]. Comments received

during the respective comment periods, whether specifically directed to Amendment 52 or the proposed rule, will be considered by NMFS in the decision to approve, partially approve, or disapprove, Amendment 52. All comments received by NMFS on the amendment or the proposed rule during their respective comment periods will be addressed in the final rule.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: July 28, 2023.

Jennifer M. Wallace,
Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.

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